

Red herring (idiom)

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The expression **red herring** is an idiom referring to a device which intends to divert the audience from the truth or an item of significance.^[1] For example, in mystery fiction, an innocent party may be purposefully cast as highly suspicious through emphasis or descriptive techniques; attention is drawn away from the true guilty party.

In a literal sense, there is no such fish species as a "red herring"; rather it refers to a particularly strong kipper, meaning a fish—typically a herring but not always—that has been strongly cured in brine and/or heavily smoked. This process makes the fish particularly pungent smelling and turns its flesh red (and makes it very noticeable, notably for the idiom).^[2] This term, in its literal sense as a type of kipper, can be dated to the late Middle Ages, as quoted here c1400 *Femina* (Trin-C B.14.40) 27: "He etep̃ no ffyssh But heryng red." Samuel Pepys used it in his diary entry of 28 February 1660 "Up in the morning, and had some red herrings to our breakfast, while my boot-heel was a-mending, by the same token the boy left the hole as big as it was before."^[3]

The idiomatic sense of "red herring" has, until very recently, been thought to originate from a supposed technique of training young scent hounds.^[2] There are variations of the story, but according to one version, the pungent red herring would be dragged along a trail until a puppy learned to follow the scent^[4]. Later, when the dog was being trained to follow the faint odour of a fox or a badger, the trainer would drag a red herring (whose strong scent confuses the animal) perpendicular to the animal's trail to confuse the dog.^[5] The dog would eventually learn to follow the original scent rather than the stronger scent. An alternate etymology points to escaping convicts who would use the pungent fish to throw off hounds in pursuit.^[6]

In reality, the technique was probably never used to train hounds or help desperate criminals. The idiom probably originates from an article published 14 February, 1807 by journalist William Cobbett in the polemical *Weekly Political Register*.^[7] In a critique of the English press, which had mistakenly reported Napoleon's defeat, Cobbett recounted that he had once used a red herring to deflect hounds in pursuit of a hare, adding "It was a mere transitory effect of the political red-herring; for, on the Saturday, the scent became as cold as a stone."^[7] As British etymologist Michael Quinion says, "This story, and [Cobbett's] extended repetition of it in 1833, was enough to get the figurative sense of *red herring* into the minds of his readers, unfortunately also with the false idea that it came from some real practice of huntsmen."^[7]

See also

- Foreshadowing
- *And Then There Were None*
- *Five Red Herrings*
- *Twelve Red Herrings*

References

- ¹ ^ Red herring. (n.d.). The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Retrieved February 04, 2009, from: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Red%20herring>

2. ^ ^{a b} Quinion, Michael (2002). "The Lure of the Red Herring". *WorldWideWords*. <http://www.worldwidewords.org/articles/herring.htm>. Retrieved April 21 2007.
3. ^ Pepys Samuel (1893). "The Diary of Samuel Pepys M.A. F.R.S.". *Samuel Pepys' Diary*. <http://www.pepysdiary.com/archive/1660/02/28/index.php>. Retrieved February 21 2006.
4. ^ Thomas Nashe, [*Nashes Lenten Stuffe*] (1599): "Next, to draw on hounds to a sent, to a redde herring skinne there is nothing comparable." (Since Nashe makes this statement not in a serious reference to hunting but as an aside in a humorous pamphlet, the professed aim of which is to extol the wonderful virtues of red herrings, it need not be evidence of actual practice. In the same paragraph he makes other unlikely claims, such as that the fish dried and powdered is a prophylactic for kidney or gallstones.
5. ^ Currall, J.E.P; M.S. Moss; S.A.J. Stuart (2008). "Authenticity: a red herring?". *Journal of Applied Logic* **6** (4): 534–544. ISSN 1570-8683.
6. ^ Hendrickson, R. (2000). The facts on file encyclopedia of word and phrase origins. United States: Checkmark.
7. ^ ^{a b c} Quinion, M. (2008). The lure of the red herring. World Wide Words. Retrieved from: <http://www.worldwidewords.org/articles/herring.htm>

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